

Sovereign and misinformed: Brexit as an exercise in democracy

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Paolo Sandro Mi 29 Jun 2016

One major point of discussion in the aftermath of the British vote to leave the European Union is whether the referendum constitutes a powerful example of what democracy is all about. While leave supporters, euro-sceptics in other EU member states, [xenophobic US presidential candidates](#), and many political commentators agree that this is indeed the case, some voices, [particularly from academia](#), have questioned the suitability of this tool – [and of any form of direct democracy more in general](#) – for dealing with once-in-a-lifetime-decisions like the one on continued membership of the EU. Someone has even gone as far as proposing, as a way to deal with the recent rise of certain forces across the political spectrum, to ‘[weed out](#)’ [ignorant individuals from the electorate](#). Has someone then really [waged war on ‘stupid people’](#)? As soon as the first commentaries on Brexit poured in, these arguments have been branded as nothing but new expressions of the old-fashioned elitism by intellectuals – those ‘experts’ mocked [publicly](#) by Michael Gove – who have been unable, once more, to communicate effectively with a large part of the general public. Shouldn’t then these experts just ‘suck it up’ because the ‘people have spoken’ but not in the way they wanted to? Aren’t ‘the people’ sovereign in a democracy, and hasn’t Brexit been a prime expression of it?

Well, that depends. If you are one of many – with [Schumpeter](#), [Dahl](#), [Sartori](#), [Waldron](#), to name but a few – with a purely formal conception of democracy as merely constituting the ‘rules of the (political) game’ in which the majority decides, then indeed the vote of the 23rd of June constitutes a very successful instance of the democratic principle at work. No doubt about it. The people, however knowledgeable on the subject-matter, have voted and decided to leave the EU (although the picture is complicated by the [constitutional landscape of the kingdom post-devolution](#) vis-à-vis the Scottish and Northern Irish vote to Remain).

Things are different though if your conception of democracy is thicker than just ‘the rules of the game’. Take for instance [Dworkin](#)’s or [Habermas](#)’ theory; or those, like [Bobbio](#) and [Kelsen](#), who see democracy as a purely formal or procedural ideal and yet have spoken of ‘pre-conditions’ that are necessary for the democratic game to get off the ground, such as the protection of some [political liberties](#) besides the obvious freedom of vote, like that of thought, of speech, of assembly, and of association; and finally [those](#) who explicitly claim how those political liberties cannot be really exercised without the positive and effective provision of some [human rights](#): e.g. to subsistence, to healthcare, to education, and to a non-biased and complete information. The reason should be apparent: can you really be said to take part into any type of collective decision-making if you don’t know what the decision is about; or if you haven’t been provided with the necessary notions and critical-thinking tools; or if you are under emotional or physical duress because you are in poor health with no access to care or you don’t have the means to sustain yourself?

Political liberties were certainly protected during the Brexit campaign. But what about those human rights that give meaning and substance to these otherwise purely nominal liberties? Clearly no unbiased and complete information was offered to the British public, which was instead supplied with many [highly misleading](#) or even utterly false information which are now, after the vote, [publicly disowned](#) by the very people who [built their campaign](#) on them. This is arguably due, among other things, to a lack of regulation when it comes to the supply of official information in these processes (as it happens, for instance, [in Ireland](#)), to the concentration of media-ownership and its [nefarious effects](#) on news plurality, and to the level of entanglement [with no filter](#) between many media outlets and politics.

Second, [polls](#) and other analyses ([here](#) and [here](#)) indicate that people with higher levels of education have voted massively for Remain, while people with less education have done the opposite. Now, while it would be certainly wrong to demonise all leave voters for being ‘[primitive, xenophobic bigots \(and stupid to boot\)](#)’, it would also be dangerous to downplay the xenophobic motivation behind many Leave supporters, as shown by the immediate

surge in [xenophobic attacks investigated](#) by the police. What matters is that both ignorance and xenophobia are [fostered](#) by the lack of an accessible and inclusive education for everyone: and this, together with the lack of a complete and non-biased information, raises legitimate doubts as to the [awareness](#) by many voters of the issues at stake ([as the surge of Google searches post-referendum might anecdotally confirm](#)).

Finally, one resounding [argument](#) echoed by many Leave supporters was the stress brought by economic migrants from the EU on the NHS, leading it to the brink of collapse. This might have had some [considerable sway](#) over the undecided as well. And understandably so, as the NHS crisis is very real and with [far-reaching consequences](#) especially for the less wealthy who cannot afford private healthcare. But is the NHS crisis really due EU migrants, when [research](#) shows how their fiscal contribution to the UK economy over the last 20 years far outweighs public money they received? Aren't instead the UK government's [austerity policies](#) driving the NHS into the ground? This ties-in too with the [connection](#) between the always deepening wealth gap between elites and masses in many western democracies, and the rise of anti-establishment movements or leaders that are able to 'ride' people's grievances towards their rulers.

Rather than just criticising the referendum as a decision-making tool because 'the people' don't have the necessary expertise to take decisions of this magnitude (as recent and successful [examples](#) indicate otherwise), we should question the conditions in which many UK voters were called to express their opinion. They, like many all over the world, have seen the progressive hollowing-out of those basic rights that make *voting* the expression of the right to individual and collective self-rule in the first place. For there is no authentic participation to public life and public decision-making without the guarantee of basic human rights to subsistence and to healthcare; nor formation of any individual or collective *genuinely informed* will without the provision of non-biased and complete information and inclusive education for all. In short, a '[democracy preserved only in form](#)' is actually *no democracy at all*: it is an empty simulacrum ready to be filled by some of the ugliest human sentiments. History has taught this lesson far too well already. And yet..

Ultimately, UK citizens who voted Leave have voiced a sentiment of betrayal and grievance that is mounting everywhere in Europe. This sentiment cannot go unheard any further. Outside the UK, austerity driven-policies by Brussels have progressively worsened the living conditions of millions of people in the Eurozone. Hence, rather than exclusively blaming the disenfranchised for casting their vote, we should rather ask ourselves whether we can still *meaningfully* say that we live in a 'democracy' – before it's [too late](#) and we witness even that remaining thin, formal democratic layer folding upon itself and unleash an old evil the European project's pragmatic utopia appeared to have defeated.

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